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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

**THE ANGER OF A GREAT NATION: OPERATION VIGILANT RESOLVE**

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## **Executive Summary**

**Title:** *The Anger of a Great Nation: An Analysis of Operation Vigilant Resolve*

**Author:** Major Gerald De Lira Jr, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** VIGILANT RESOLVE was a strategic failure characterized by a hasty - as well as poorly timed, planned, and coordinated - overreaction on the part of U.S. strategic leaders.

**Discussion:** In the morning hours of Wednesday, 31 March 2004, four American private security contractors were ambushed and killed by insurgents while driving through the city of Fallujah, Iraq. By the end of the day, the United States and the rest of the world would see these grisly images along with the now infamous images of two dismembered and charred corpses hanging upside down from a bridge over the Euphrates River in western Fallujah. What followed was Operation VIGILANT RESOLVE; a battle for control of Fallujah in which U.S. Marines saw urban combat with a level of intensity not seen since the battle of Hue City in 1968. Against the recommendation of their commander for a more patient and deliberate approach to pacifying Fallujah, the Marines of the I Marine Expeditionary Force were ordered to conduct VIGILANT RESOLVE in response to the killings of the Blackwater contractors. With the advice of Secretary of Defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld, and head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, President George W. Bush wanted to respond to the Blackwater ambush with a show of force to demonstrate that the United States would not tolerate attacks, such as that of 31 March. Just days after the operation commenced with heavy fighting, representatives of U.S. policy in Baghdad came under unexpected criticism and political pressure from members of the interim Iraqi government and the British government. With the 1 July return of Iraqi sovereignty in jeopardy, the United States aborted the operation and ordered a halt to offensive operations only five days into an operation expected to last three to four weeks. Although coalition forces had begun to see success and were on course to accomplish their mission, none of the operation's objectives were accomplished when the assault was halted.

**Conclusion:** Within Iraq, and much of the Middle East, VIGILANT RESOLVE turned Fallujah into a rallying cry: a symbol of resistance against and victory over the United States which served to bolster support for the insurgency's cause. As a result of the President and Secretary of Defense's haste, lack of situational awareness, and miscalculation of the potential consequences of a large scale, kinetic operation at that particular time, strategic and operational goals (which may or may not have even existed) relating to VIGILANT RESOLVE were not laid out for commanders at the tactical level. Instead of helping the already tenuous situation in Iraq in 2004, VIGILANT RESOLVE exacerbated it further.

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## Introduction

In the morning hours of Wednesday, 31 March 2004, insurgents ambushed and killed four American private security contractors driving through the city of Fallujah, Iraq. As an angry mob of Iraqis began to gather, their corpses were set on fire, dismembered, beaten, and dragged through the streets of the city while locals danced and celebrated in the streets before Arab television cameras. By the end of the day, the United States and the rest of the world would see these grisly images along with the now infamous images of two dismembered and charred corpses hanging upside down from a bridge over the Euphrates River in western Fallujah.<sup>1</sup>

What followed was Operation VIGILANT RESOLVE; a battle for control of Fallujah in which U.S. Marines saw urban combat with a level of intensity not seen since the battle of Hue City in 1968. Against the recommendation of their commander for a more patient and deliberate approach to pacifying Fallujah, the Marines of the I Marine Expeditionary Force were ordered to conduct VIGILANT RESOLVE in response to the killings of the Blackwater contractors. With the advice of Secretary of Defense, Donald H. Rumsfeld, and head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, President George W. Bush wanted to respond to the Blackwater ambush with a show of force to demonstrate that the United States would not tolerate attacks, such as that of 31 March. Just days after the operation commenced with heavy fighting, U.S. representatives in Baghdad came under unexpected criticism and political pressure from members of the interim Iraqi government and the British government. With the 1 July return of Iraqi-sovereignty-in-jeopardy, the United States aborted the operation and ordered a halt to offensive operations only five days into an operation expected to last three to four weeks.<sup>2</sup>

Although coalition forces had begun to see success and were on course to accomplish their mission, none of the operation's objectives were accomplished when the assault was halted.

Within Iraq, and much of the Middle East, VIGILANT RESOLVE turned Fallujah into a rallying cry: a symbol of resistance against and victory over the United States which served to bolster support for the insurgency's cause. VIGILANT RESOLVE was a strategic failure characterized by a hasty - as well as poorly timed, planned, and coordinated - overreaction on the part of U.S. strategic leaders. As a result of the President and Secretary of Defense's haste, lack of situational awareness, and miscalculation of the potential consequences of a large scale, kinetic operation at that particular time, strategic and operational goals (which may or may not have even existed) relating to VIGILANT RESOLVE were not laid out for commanders at the tactical level. Instead of helping the already tenuous situation in Iraq in 2004, VIGILANT RESOLVE exacerbated it further.

## **Background**

Fallujah is located on the Euphrates River in eastern Al Anbar Province, approximately 60 kilometers due west from the heart of Baghdad. In 2004, Fallujah had a mostly Sunni population of 300,000.<sup>3</sup> With forty-seven mosques located within the city and fifty more in its neighboring villages, Fallujah was known as "The City of Mosques."<sup>4</sup> In *No True Glory*, Bing West described Fallujah as, "laid out in a square grid of wide boulevards, Fallujah comprised of two thousand blocks of courtyard walls, tenements, two-story concrete houses, and squalid alleyways" in which "half-completed houses, garbage heaps, and wrecks of old cars cluttered every neighborhood."<sup>5</sup> Fallujah had a long history as a hard town dating back to World War I when it was the center of a bloody rebellion after British forces liberated Mesopotamia from Ottoman rule.<sup>6</sup> Saddam's regime recruited Sunnis from local tribes to become part of his elite

military units and intelligence services.<sup>7</sup> These organizations played a key role in crushing the Shi'a uprising that ensued in 1991 immediately after the First Gulf War.

Prior to the handover of control of Al Anbar from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division to the I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) on 24 March 2004, a series of violent events took place within Fallujah, which caused the city to gain a reputation as one of the more dangerous cities in Iraq. During the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, U.S. forces deemed Fallujah to have no tactical significance and bypassed the city at the time. On 23 April 2003, troops from the U.S. Army's 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division were the first U.S. forces to arrive in Fallujah after the invasion.<sup>8</sup> Unlike some of the other cities in Iraq, cheering crowds did not greet the American soldiers who entered the city.<sup>9</sup> In the first five months after the invasion, control of Fallujah would change hands four times between the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne, a company from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), 1500 soldiers from 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, back to 3<sup>rd</sup> ACR until taken over by the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 505<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Fallujah would remain in the control of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division from September 2003 until they handed the city over to the Marines in March of 2004.<sup>10</sup>

Prior to the arrival of I MEF, the U.S. Army units saw many violent incidents that highlighted and contributed to the instability of Fallujah. In addition to routine attacks on U.S. personnel, several of the more significant incidents included: a protest in which fifteen Iraqi civilians were killed by U.S. troops; the accidental killing of seven Iraq policemen and hospital guards by U.S. troops in September, 2003; the shoot down of a CH-47 Chinook helicopter in November 2003; an attack on a convoy carrying CENTCOM Commander, General John Abizaid and 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division Commander, Major General Charles Swannack on 12 February 2004; and a daylight raid in which insurgents killed twenty-one and wounded thirty-three people



during an attack on an Iraqi Police station and on 14 February 2004.<sup>11</sup>

In his memoir *My Year in Iraq*, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Ambassador L. Paul “Jerry” Bremer III recalled that he raised concerns to General Abizaid and CJTF-7 Commander, Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez after the 14 February attack in Fallujah, which demonstrated that

the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne had been unable to establish adequate security in the province, especially in cities like Fallujah and Ramadi, farther west on the Euphrates. By March 2004, there was a de facto standoff in Fallujah: the 82<sup>nd</sup> ringed the city but effectively ceded control of its streets to its townsmen. Insurgents continued to use the urban sanctuary to ambush American troops, plant IEDs, and stockpile weapons.<sup>12</sup>

Bremer stated that the U.S. had done little after the November shoot down of a Chinook helicopter or after the attack on the Fallujah police station in February that killed fourteen police officers. Bremer further stated, “By now, the 82<sup>nd</sup> – due to rotate home – was conducting a few spot patrols in the city. I raised my concerns with Generals Abizaid and Sanchez. ‘The 82nd isn’t realistic about Anbar’ I said, ‘The situation is not going to improve until we clean out Fallujah.’ Abizaid agreed. Sanchez did not.”<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the accidental deaths of civilians and Iraqi police, the constant turnover of units between May and September caused a lack of sense of “ownership” on the part of U.S. forces. Withdrawal from bases within the city and the eventual minimization of patrols within the city by the 82<sup>nd</sup>, lessened presence within city and allowed insurgents more freedom of action. Lack of funding to rebuild infrastructure, CPA’s Deba’athification policy and decision to dissolve the Iraqi Army left an estimated 70,000 Fallujans, many of whom were young men, unemployed and disaffected.

## **The Blackwater Ambush**

On Wednesday morning, 31 March 2004, four Blackwater Security contractors departed Camp Fallujah, the Marine Corps base and headquarters for I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF). Camp Fallujah was a military compound located two kilometers away from the eastern edge of the city. The contractors were traveling in two unarmored Mitsubishi Pajero SUVs with two security contractors in each vehicle. Their mission was to escort three flatbed trucks belonging to ESS Support Services Worldwide (a subcontractor of Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR)) to the Al Taqaddam Air Base (formerly known as Forward Operating Base (FOB) Ridgeway), approximately 16 kilometers west of Fallujah. Their mission had begun the previous day when they departed from their home base of Camp Taji, approximately 25 kilometers northwest of central Baghdad and 50 kilometer northeast of the center of Fallujah.<sup>14</sup>

Lacking proper maps, and time to perform sufficient mission planning prior to departure, the convoy lost its way and arrived at Camp Fallujah on the evening of 30 March, thinking that they had reached their destination.<sup>15</sup> Having learned that they had arrived at the wrong base, the contractors spent the night at Camp Fallujah, with the intention of reaching the correct destination, Al Taqaddam, the next day. Against the warnings that they had received from the security company that Blackwater had recently replaced, as well as the KBR contractors who they spoke to at Camp Fallujah, the contractors decided to shortcut their route by driving directly through downtown Fallujah.<sup>16</sup> To complicate matters further, the Blackwater team did not coordinate their planned actions with I MEF or Regimental Combat Team 1, whom were responsible for the area of operations that included Fallujah. Therefore, when the attack occurred, the Marines were unaware of the presence of contractors driving through Fallujah.

According to the truck drivers that were being escorted that day, the convoy first passed through an Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) checkpoint and were "simply waved through." Once inside the city, they were stopped at an Iraqi Police checkpoint where the two contractors in the lead vehicle spoke with an officer and were then allowed to proceed. Several blocks later, traffic again had come to a halt. After several minutes of remaining stationary, both vehicles that were carrying the Blackwater contractors were attacked by at least five insurgents carrying AK-47s. Contrary to initial reports, heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) were not used in the attack. The ESS truck drivers managed to drive away safely from the scene and out of the city without being attacked: presumably, the insurgents did not realize that they were with the contractors.<sup>17</sup> Following the initial attack, both vehicles and the victims were set on fire, their charred corpses dismembered, and their dismembered bodies dragged through the streets of Fallujah while being beaten by a crowd of angry Fallujans. That day, the world would see photographs and video depicting the scene, which culminated with the charred bodies of two of the contractors being hung from a bridge on the western edge of Fallujah. These images stirred up memories and emotions of the "Blackhawk Down" incident, which took place in October 1993 when the bodies of U.S. soldiers were filmed being beaten and dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, Somalia before a celebrating crowd. These images made it clear that coalition forces did not control Fallujah.

### **The Marines' Reaction**

When news of the ambush and the ensuing carnage reached Major General (now General) James N. Mattis, commander of the First Marine Division, he conferred with his Chief of Staff, Colonel (now Lieutenant General) Joseph F. Dunford. Dunford told Mattis, "the contractors are dead. If we go in to get their bodies, we'll have to kill hundreds, including kids,"

"I recommend we stay out." When asked by Mattis where I MEF stood, Dunford replied, "General Conway thinks we should let the mob exhaust itself." "That's it then," Mattis said. "Rushing in makes no sense."<sup>18</sup> That evening, Col Dunford sat down and composed an email that was used on the evening news back in the U.S. "We're not going to overreact to today's violence," he wrote, "we have a methodology of patient, persistent presence. We will identify who was responsible, and in cooperation with Iraqi security forces, we will kill them."<sup>19</sup> This view was consistent with the over-arching strategy that the Marines had wanted to implement when they returned to Iraq and assumed control of Al Anbar.

In the three short months spent stateside while preparing for I MEF's return to Iraq, their commander Lieutenant General (now General) James T. Conway and his division commander, MajGen Mattis had made it clear to their Marines that their approach to Al Anbar would be characterized by same patience and persistence demonstrated by Marines who had fought in past counterinsurgencies. The Marines of I MEF would draw on their Corps' experiences in fighting insurgencies in Haiti and the "Banana Wars" in Central America. They planned to avoid using heavy-handed tactics, such as unnecessarily kicking in doors, using air strikes to knock down buildings, and firing artillery into civilian neighborhoods. The Marines intended to demonstrate respect for the locals and gain their trust by learning Arabic, observing Iraqi customs, taking off their sunglasses when speaking to Iraqis and ensuring that they did not take actions to humiliate, dishonor, or shame Iraqi citizens, particularly during raids. Drawing upon the lessons that were learned from their experience with Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam, the Marines planned to live among the people in Sunni towns and villages while training Iraqi security forces. They aimed to focus their fight on the conditions that helped to fuel the insurgency and not so much the insurgents themselves. They intended to do this by gaining the popular support of the people

by focusing on civil projects and rebuilding the province's infrastructure. One planned tactic of the Marines was particularly controversial. In *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq*, Thomas Ricks stated that the Marines intended to wear their green camouflage uniforms and black boots within the first forty-five days on the ground as a symbolic gesture intended to make it clear to the Iraqis that the Marines were different from their predecessors — that a new chapter in the reconstruction of Iraq had begun. According to Ricks, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division commander had expressed resentment for the idea as he felt that it a personal affront to him and his unit.<sup>20</sup> Subsequently, General Mattis stated he reversed his decision concerning the green uniforms, not because of his predecessor's protest, but due to operational security concerns. Since the Army and Marine Corps' desert camouflage uniforms looked somewhat similar during this time, he wanted to avoid any indication that a turnover between the Army and the Marines had occurred.<sup>21</sup>

After the Blackwater ambush, the Iraqi police returned three of the bodies the next day and the fourth body the following day. In *No True Glory*, West stated that the CIA and military intelligence began to match the faces to names and addresses of those responsible for the attacks and had more than twenty names placed on a list of targets for future raids. With the help of a special operations task force working with them at the time, the Marines planned to utilize this intelligence, in addition to exploiting existing tribal divisions within Fallujah, in order to methodically capture or kill those responsible for the Blackwater attack.<sup>22</sup> In spite of their expressed desire to stick to their engagement plan and their views on how to handle the aftermath of the Blackwater ambush, the Marines would soon learn that the United States' civilian leadership in Washington did not share their plans and intentions.

## **CJTF-7, CENTCOM, and Washington's Reaction**

Ambassador Bremer recalled that on 31 March, Lieutenant General (LTG) Ricardo S. Sanchez reported to him that he had "landed hard" on LtGen Conway for not having sent troops into the city as soon as the Marines had learned that the Blackwater men had been ambushed. According to Sanchez, Conway's response was that he was waiting for the Iraqi Police to call I MEF for help. However, Gen Mattis stated that Gen Conway did not order troops into the city because "the [Blackwater] killing had been done already."<sup>23</sup> Ambassador Bremer then asked Sanchez, "what's your next move? We've got to react to this or the enemy will conclude we're irresolute." LTG Sanchez informed the ambassador that his staff was currently in the process of refining the plans for an offensive operation originally planned for Fallujah in the fall of 2003 but was put on hold indefinitely when the Iraqi Minister of the Interior had gotten what Sanchez described as "cold feet" about the operation.<sup>24</sup>

In *Wiser in Battle*, LTG Sanchez' view on the situation was that the Blackwater incident was not considered a major tactical setback but "the gruesome images of charred corpses hanging from the bridge" and "the resulting media frenzy and emotional firestorm of controversy elevated the Blackwater incident to top priority at the White House." Sanchez recalled that, "there was a consensus across the board from civilian and military leaders (including me) that we had to respond with force," as well as that, "a forceful response was a way for the administration to show resolve and that military leaders (including me) believed that we had to go on the offensive to prove to the insurgents that we would stand up to these attacks on Americans."<sup>25</sup>

LTG Sanchez also recalled that Secretary Rumsfeld was "particularly forceful in his demand for action." "We've got to pound these guys," Rumsfeld declared and added that, "this is also a good opportunity for us to push the Sunnis on the Governing Council to step forward

and condemn this attack, and we'll remember those who do not. It's time for them to choose. They are either with us or against us." According to LTG Sanchez, the Marines were "reluctant to launch too quickly," they had just begun settling into Al Anbar and had not had the chance to begin their engagement strategy. LTG Sanchez believed that the Marines' recommended approach was a good idea and he supported it, but despite his concerns and those of the Marines, Secretary Rumsfeld directed CENTCOM and CJTF-7 to begin planning for an immediate offensive into Fallujah.<sup>26</sup> After examining the mission and its risks, GEN Abizaid, in a VTC with Rumsfeld and Bremer, stated that CJTF-7 and CENTCOM agreed with the Marines' assessment of the situation and planned response, "the timing is not right and they haven't had time to implement their engagement program" and advised, "we should wait." Secretary Rumsfeld disagreed, "No, we've got to attack," "we must do more than just get the perpetrators of this Blackwater incident" and emphasized that, "we need to make sure that Iraqis in other cities receive our message."<sup>27</sup>

In the final briefing of Operation VIGILANT RESOLVE to the President and NSC, the missions as approved by the White house and NSC were: (1) eliminate Fallujah as a safe haven for Sunni insurgents; (2) eliminate all weapons caches from the city; (3) establish law and order for long-term stability and security; and (4) capture or kill the perpetrators of the Blackwater ambush.<sup>28</sup> According to LTG Sanchez, President Bush was told that the best estimate was that it would take three to four weeks of intense fighting. The President was also briefed on estimates regarding collateral damage to the city, the cost to rebuild, and the potential impact on the population. Sanchez also recalled that it was at that time that, "GEN Abizaid made it clear that we preferred not to launch the attack right now." According to Sanchez, Abizaid pointed out that the Marines would like to have time to implement their strategy with the Sunnis, and he and LTG

Sanchez supported their recommendation. Sanchez recalled, "President Bush stated that he appreciated our caution, but then ordered us to attack."<sup>29</sup>

LTG Sanchez recalled that immediately after the VTC had ended, he called LtGen Conway and told him that the decision had been made to execute VIGILANT RESOLVE. Sanchez informed Conway that he and Abizaid had communicated Conway's concerns to the President but the President had made the decision to launch the offensive anyway. LtGen Conway replied "Okay, General, I don't like it, but we're prepared to execute."<sup>30</sup> Conway later publicly stated that he objected to the order because "we felt like we had a method that we wanted to apply in Fallujah: that we ought to probably let the situation settle before we appeared to be attacking out of revenge." Later Conway reflected, "Would our system have been better? Would we have been able to bring over the people of Fallujah with our methods? You'll never know that for sure, but at the time we certainly thought so."<sup>31</sup> Gen Mattis later recalled that upon receiving the order to attack, he stated, "Just don't stop us [once we begin]."<sup>32</sup>

### **VIGILANT RESOLVE Begins**

On 2 April, the MEF ordered a cordon established around the city, as well as checkpoints to stop all traffic flowing into and out of the city with the exception of food and medical supplies. The only military age males allowed out of the city at that time were those accompanying family members. Gen Mattis recollected that after the attack had commenced, a "mass civilian evacuation" ensued with non-combatants (possible insurgents among them) exiting from the southern part of the city.<sup>33</sup> Also on 2 April, the commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marines (2/1), LtCol Gregg Olson met with the city council. He thanked them for returning the bodies and asked them for a written statement denouncing the lynching. The sheiks and imams rejected his request and released a statement saying that they were opposed to mutilation but not



the killing of Americans.<sup>34</sup>

On 3 April, the MEF sent the CJTF-7 order to MajGen Mattis' staff at the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division Headquarters in Ramadi. The order directed that offensive operations be conducted against the city of Fallujah. In *No True Glory*, Bing West set the stage for the battle with,

in Washington, however, there was no comparable strategic plan for Fallujah. The JTF order didn't specify what the seizure of the city was intended to accomplish. There was no document laying out the mission as set forth by Gen Abizaid, its intent as articulated by Secretary Rumsfeld, the CIA's projection of opposition at the strategic level, the CPA's consultations with the Iraqi Governing Council, or the State Department's coordination with allies. The anticipated phases and timelines of the strategic campaign--warning the population, consulting with allies, gaining Iraqi agreement, preparing the press, briefing the Congress, marshaling the forces, timelines for seizing the city, reestablishing a city government—were not laid out.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Plan to Clear Fallujah**

With his mission in hand, MajGen Mattis laid out four objectives: (1) Arrest the perpetrators of the Blackwater ambush; (2) Clean out the foreign fighters; (3) Remove all heavy weapons from the city; (4) Reopen Highway 10 (the main east-west road that cut through the center of the town) for military traffic.<sup>36</sup> The Division's plan was relatively simple; a cordon would be established around the city while 2/1 would move into the city from the northwest corner (The Jolan District) and 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines (1/5), led by LtCol Byrne, would begin clearing the city from the southeast. Their commander, Colonel (now Brigadier General) John Toolan, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment, wanted to squeeze the insurgents between these two battalions. Supporting 2/1 and 1/5, the 1<sup>st</sup> Reconnaissance Battalion would screen to the south of the city.<sup>37</sup> The regimental commander's overall goal was to seize the center of the city, which included the government center, to establish an enduring presence in the center of the city and use that persistent presence to collect intelligence on the enemy.<sup>38</sup> To get to the center of the

city, Colonel Toolan intended to attack block by block, eliminate strong points, capture weapons caches, and kill insurgents who stood and fought.<sup>39</sup> While his battalions spent the day preparing to get into position, Colonel Toolan met with the city elders. He hoped that they would avoid violent confrontation and deliver those responsible for the Blackwater ambush to coalition forces but refused to do so. When the city elders failed to deliver anyone to the coalition on 4 April, the Marines continued to establish their cordon around the city. Not knowing who the true leaders were within the city was a problem that continually plagued the coalition throughout the course of these events.

That evening, LtCol Olson and 2/1 moved into the northwestern outskirts of the city. Augmented by one company of Iraqi commandos, 2/1 probed the city's defenses and drew contact from buildings on the edge of the city as one company crossed the railroad tracks just 300 meters north of the city. In response, insurgents opened up with a fusillade of machine-gun and RPG fire that killed Corporal Tyler Fey.<sup>40</sup> On the morning of 5 April, LtCol Olson and 2/1 continued their push into the city with two companies, while a third company held the bridges and the peninsula on the west side of the city. As they advanced down the narrow streets, insurgents operating in groups of five to ten men, rushed down the streets towards the Marines, firing wildly, then ducking off to their left or right into alleyways.

At 0300 on April 5<sup>th</sup>, LtCol Byrne and 1/5 advanced into the industrial district on the southeastern side of the city. By morning, two companies from 1/5 had pushed up to the south side of Highway 10 and spent most of that day fighting insurgents operating out of a mosque on the north side of the highway. While two companies fought against the enemy to the north, 1/5's Weapons Company conducted a thorough sweep through the buildings to the south of the battalion's lines. During that sweep, Weapons Company found large quantities of weapons that

included mortars, rockets, dozens of machine guns, over a ton of TNT and black powder, bomb-making material, explosive vests and belts.<sup>41</sup>

After the operation ended, CJTF-7 estimated that during Operation VIGILANT RESOLVE the Marines fought against 2000 hard-core insurgents including 200 foreign fighters.<sup>42</sup> The enemy fighters were not structured within a hierarchy with distinct levels of leadership but rather gangs organized around neighborhoods, mosques and local leaders.<sup>43</sup> Despite the lack of a formal military-like structure, Marines observed some groups of insurgents who operated using sophisticated small-unit tactics, such as advancing towards the Marines under the cover of coordinated mortar fire and the employment of a layered defense within the city. Other Marines witnessed tactics that included the use of ambulances and police cars to move weapons and ammunition around the battlefield.<sup>44</sup>

By that afternoon, Colonel Toolan felt that he had an understanding of how the enemy would fight. What he needed, was additional troops. MajGen Mattis told him that reinforcements would arrive soon in the form of LtCol Brian P. McCoy's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Fourth Marines (3/4), LtCol Giles Kyser's Second Battalion, Second Marines (2/2), and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the New Iraqi Army. When the Iraqi battalion departed the northern outskirts of Baghdad enroute Fallujah that day, insurgents ambushed the convoy, during which the battalion suffered casualties and lost its combat effectiveness, and forced the convoy's return to Camp Taji. When a roll call was taken back at the base, over 100 soldiers had deserted. The Iraqi battalion would never make it to Fallujah.<sup>45</sup> MajGen Mattis knew that Col Toolan needed more troops. Although he had asked for them on multiple occasions, Mattis never received them.<sup>46</sup> In order to get the right amount of firepower needed to accomplish the mission inside of the city, Mattis pulled 2/2 and 3/4 away from their assigned areas of operation, accepting the risk of

leaving those areas uncovered. Additionally, he assigned RCT-7 to conduct Operation RIPPER SWEEP. This operation served as a supporting effort in which RCT-7 swept the areas surrounding Fallujah, in order to interdict enemy forces attempting to either flee from or reinforce Fallujah.

On 6 April while most of the world was focused on Fallujah, the most intense fighting that day was in Ramadi, the provincial capital of Al Anbar, where LtCol Paul Kennedy's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 4<sup>th</sup> Marines (2/4) were conducting operations in their assigned area of operation.<sup>47</sup> With intelligence indicating that a major enemy offensive was imminent, LtCol Kennedy asked the CIA for help in identifying targets that they could capture as part of a preemptive attack. Early that morning, Marines from 2/4 began knocking on doors, looking for their targets. By the end of the day, twelve Marines from 2/4 had been killed in action and twenty-five wounded in a series of ambushes and firefights with insurgents within Ramadi.<sup>48</sup>

The next day, 7 April saw another day of heavy fighting in Fallujah and even heavier fighting in Ramadi. The press reported that coalition in Fallujah had dropped a JDAM (500lb bomb) on a mosque but did not explain that insurgents were using the minarets to fire on Marines. The Arab press also reported that coalition aircraft bombed four homes killing eight women and sixteen children.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, Marines continued to find large quantities of weapons, ammunition explosives, and bomb-making material in the industrial area of Fallujah. As the fighting raged on that day, political pressure resulting from the assault on Fallujah began to mount both in Washington and in Baghdad.

### **The Offensive Gets Halted**

On the morning of 8 April, Ambassador Bremer was facing in a full-scale political crisis that resulted from the assault on Fallujah and the military operations in Najaf against Radical

Shiite Cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army. That morning, Iraq's Interior Minister and its Minister of Human Rights had announced their resignation. Additionally, a prominent Shiite member of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) had "suspended" his membership and several other prominent members of the council threatened resignation in protest of the coalition's operation. They denounced what they viewed as punishment of Iraqi citizens for the actions of a few, and they were particularly upset at the fact that they had not been consulted before U.S. forces launched their attacks. It was clear to Bremer that continuing in Fallujah would threaten the entire political process. Losing the IGC meant that the 30 June deadline to restore sovereignty back to Iraq could not be met, with "no clear way to revive the political process or idea how long it would take."<sup>50</sup> The White House's timeline for the drafting of the Iraqi constitution and the elections that were scheduled for January 2005 were now also in serious jeopardy.<sup>51</sup> While Ambassador Bremer and the CPA were dealing with the political crisis in Baghdad, LtCol McCoy and 3/4 moved from Haditha to Fallujah and reinforced RCT 1 by placing three of its companies in positions outside the northeast corner of the city.<sup>52</sup>

On the morning of 9 April, Ambassador Bremer met with LTG Sanchez and GEN Abizaid to discuss the operation and the serious political problems that it was causing. In his memoir, Bremer recalled that he explained the unraveling of political process and consequences to both generals and that they both understood. Bremer states he understood impact of ceasing the operation on the military but that the "steady drumbeat of the Arab press had changed things on the ground."<sup>53</sup> Bremer stated that he had asked the generals which conditions should be met in order to bring about a cease-fire and concluded that, "we would give these terms to the Governing Council's delegation to put to Fallujah leaders: The city's sheiks must hand over the

killers of our men. We also wanted the names of the foreign fighters there. The insurgents had to lay down arms. If they fired upon us, we would react.”<sup>54</sup>

In *Wiser in Battle*, LTG Sanchez’s version of that how that same meeting transpired differs from Ambassador Bremer’s account. Sanchez remembered the meeting with Abizaid and Bremer as especially heated and he recalled Bremer telling him that he had to call off the operation to which he adamantly refused and told GEN Abizaid that if he wanted that order issued, he would have to find another commander to do it. He also remembered telling both Bremer and Abizaid that, “we can’t stop now. If we don’t finish the mission we’re going to have to come back and do it later” and that, “if we pull out under fire, it will be a strategic defeat for America. And you know that the first thing that Al Jazeera will report is that the enemy caused the retreat.” Sanchez recalled that Abizaid agreed with him but also reminded him of the political problem and its ramifications. Abizaid also informed Sanchez that the White House was going to stop the attack whether they issued the orders or not.<sup>55</sup>

LTG Sanchez recalled that as soon as he got back to his office, he placed a call to LtGen Conway, and told him to expect soon an order to cease offensive operations to which LtGen Conway replied, “What? What the hell are we doing? We’re right on the verge of breaking this thing wide open.” Sanchez explained to Conway, “look, it’s political and we really don’t have a choice. The Iraqi political process is about to collapse and the transfer of sovereignty is at risk. The order will come down to you immediately, and you will have about eight to twelve hours to implement it. Do what you need to do until then.” Conway acknowledged that he understood but insisted that he retain the authority to conduct defensive operations that would allow his Marines to return fire when attacked. Sanchez responded, “You have that authority. Make sure you conduct very robust counterattacks if your positions are attacked.”<sup>56</sup> At noon on 9 April, a

unilateral "suspension of offensive operations" was announced by the coalition in Baghdad.<sup>57</sup> In *Fiasco*, Ricks stated, "Mattis was furious. He believed that the enemy would be defeated within a few more days. The insurgents lacked bunkers and ammunition and they weren't able to get additional supplies through the cordon that the Marines had put up around the city."<sup>58</sup>

### **Fallujah Post –Vigilant Resolve**

Although the order had been issued to cease offensive operations, the Marines did not immediately withdraw from the city. The Marines held their positions within the city and skirmishes continued until the end of April when the Marines were ordered to withdraw from their positions inside the city. Following the 9 April announcement, the IGC sent a contingent of doctors, lawyers and other friends of the Iraqi government from Baghdad to Fallujah in order to negotiate with the insurgents and help put an end to the fighting. After one week, the negotiators proved to have absolutely no influence and an inability to sway the insurgent leadership to stop the fighting. Two former Iraqi military leaders replaced the ineffective team of negotiators from Baghdad and proved to have slightly more influence in getting the insurgents to back away from the Marines' positions. This allowed the battle, to de-escalate to a lesser degree.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Fallujah Brigade Solution**

In an effort to find a solution to the problem of how to stabilize Fallujah, General Conway, and his staff, developed the concept of "The Fallujah Brigade." This unit would be comprised of former Iraqi officers and soldiers from the local area, many of who had just fought against the coalition. Shortly after the implementation of the Fallujah Brigade, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke and the world's attention shifted away from Fallujah. Over the summer, the Fallujah Brigade would slowly dissolve as many of its ranks joined the insurgency and provided them with the arms and supplies issued from U.S. stocks. BGen Toolan later remembered that

he was not happy when the Fallujah Brigade took control of the city but, in retrospect, acknowledged that the Fallujah Brigade initiative gave the coalition the opportunity to show the Iraqis that they had tried to let the Iraqis secure the city by themselves. After VIGILANT RESOLVE, RCT-1 set up offices outside of the city that paid compensation to locals for damages resulting from the battle. BGen Toolan used this opportunity to collect intelligence from the locals and determine which leaders were legitimate and which were not.

VIGILANT RESOLVE ended with 36 U.S. military killed in action, 200 insurgents killed, and an estimated 600 Iraqi civilians killed.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the President had ordered the operation with the intent to “demonstrate resolve” and help pacify Iraq, the opposite occurred, and many parts of the country exploded in violence. The U.S. political leadership in Washington and Baghdad did not consult with the Iraqi Governing Council and gain their support before launching the assault on Fallujah, and it cost the coalition dearly. Furthermore, the coalition’s inability to “put an Iraqi face” on the assault negatively impacted the credibility of the coalition’s stated intentions, though at this point in the occupation of Iraq, Iraqi security forces were simply not ready to take on this role. Therefore, to the average Iraqi, VIGILANT RESOLVE appeared to be U.S. oppression. Further compounding the problem was the negative impact of Al Jazeera’s unsubstantiated reports of indiscriminate violence against noncombatants and lack of embedded journalists with the Marines in the city that may have mitigated Al Jazeera’s claims. Instead, Fallujah became a rallying cry and symbol of resistance. For the Marines, it was clear that the battle for Fallujah was not over. They knew that in order to bring stability to the city, offensive operations would have to resume eventually and when they did, the insurgents would most likely be re-armed, reinforced, and fighting from more fortified defensive positions. They knew that a future operation in Fallujah would end up costing more lives than if the Marines had



been allowed to continue their initial penetration into the city.

### **Operation AL FAJR**

As the summer of 2004 progressed, it became more apparent that the Fallujah Brigade solution had failed and that the city continued to be a safe haven and base of operations for an increasing number of insurgents including, Iraq's most notorious terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. This was not only apparent to the coalition but also more importantly, it had become obvious to the Iraqi government and most Fallujans that something had to be done. This time, U.S. forces would receive the support of the Iraqi government in their conduct of operation AL FAJR ("New Dawn"). This operation was fought with six U.S. Marine Corps infantry battalions, two U.S. Army infantry battalions, and two Iraqi Army battalions over a period of ten days. Coalition forces consisted of approximately 25,000 U.S. Marines, U.S. Army soldiers, and Iraqi troops.<sup>61</sup> Before AL FAJR commenced, nearly all of the civilians had fled in anticipation of the operation, leaving only about 400 noncombatants remaining in the city. This time, the interim Iraqi government had prepared statements to support the attack, but even with political support and massive numbers on the coalition's side, the battle was not easy and not without cost. Due to the amount of time that had passed between VIGILANT RESOLVE and AL FAJR, the insurgents had greater freedom of action within the city and time to better prepare for an assault. This caused the fighting in November to be much tougher and deadlier than what was experienced in April. This time, Marines and their coalition partners faced 306 prepared fighting positions within the city.<sup>62</sup> Coalition forces would suffer fifty-four U.S. dead, 425 U.S. wounded, eight Iraqi soldiers dead, and forty-three Iraqi soldiers wounded. Casualty estimates on the side of the insurgency numbered between 1,000 to 2,000 dead.<sup>63</sup> Following the successful recapture of control of the city, the coalition spent six weeks searching an estimated 20-30,000

buildings for weapons caches. During this sweep, they discovered two car bomb factories, twenty-four bomb factories, 455 weapons caches and three buildings used as torture chambers.<sup>64</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (U.S. Department of State, January 2009) identifies four basic tactics historically utilized by insurgents to defeat stronger security forces: *Provocation, Intimidation, Protraction, and Exhaustion*.<sup>65</sup> The Blackwater ambush was a classic provocation attack by the insurgents. The forceful response on the part of the U.S. that led to collateral damage and civilian deaths was exactly the response that the insurgents looked for and what the Marines had tried to avoid. The U.S. response turned Fallujans against the U.S. and helped the insurgents gain legitimacy and sympathy for their cause. Although hindsight is always 20/20 and it is easy to criticize decisions made in the heat of battle, perhaps the most glaring criticism of Operation VIGILANT RESOLVE was its timing. Before the Blackwater Ambush, the media had highlighted Fallujah as a violent and dangerous city. Once insurgents killed the four Blackwater contractors, the spotlight on Fallujah had been brighter than ever and the world was closely watching to see how the U.S. would react. Although MajGen Mattis observed that, "great nations do not get angry," few in the U.S. leadership heeded his remark. Unfortunately, the President and Secretary Rumsfeld took the bait laid by the insurgents and ordered a response that did not fully take into account the effects that it would have. The patient, persistent and methodical approach that the Marines favored could have yielded a more favorable outcome to the instability of Fallujah. That is not to say that a large-scale offensive operation should have *never* been conducted but that with more time, the political situation in Baghdad could have been shaped better and the Marines responsible for pacifying Fallujah could

have been more successful had they not been pushed into attacking so soon after the Blackwater ambush.

Once the decision had been made to conduct VIGILANT RESOLVE, the Marines should have been allowed to finish the job. Expressing his frustration over the order to withdraw from Fallujah, MajGen Mattis paraphrased a quote by Napoleon, "If you're going to take Vienna, then take Vienna."<sup>66</sup> When the operation was halted, the Marines had the momentum of the battle in their favor, and a foothold in the city had been gained at the cost of American lives. Stopping short of the coalition's stated objectives only delayed the inevitable. It allowed insurgents (and those who were sympathetic to them) to think they had driven the Americans out. As LTG Sanchez predicted, it was a strategic victory for the insurgents, the enemy was given time to recover and prepare better defensive positions in the city, and ultimately, the second battle was more costly in terms of friendly casualties and damage to the city.

In Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film *The Godfather*, Vito Corleone's (Marlon Brando) crime family is in danger of being toppled by rivals and once allies conspiring against him. Members of his family (including his oldest son) are killed and he himself barely survives an assassination attempt. Not knowing whom to trust, he knowingly risks appearing weak by not retaliating until he knows exactly who friends and enemies are. Succeeding his ill father, Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) continues to be patient in finding out who his family's real enemies are, in spite of knowing that (like his father) his perceived unwillingness to seek violent retribution makes him appear weak on the surface. Once Corleone identifies his enemies, he carefully plans, and waits for the right moment after everyone else has forgotten. In the film's climax, Corleone completely surprises his enemies, by taking decisive action at the time and

place of *his* choosing in order to eliminate all of adversaries one by one until he is the only one left standing.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ricardo S. Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier's Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 332.

<sup>3</sup> Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 313.

<sup>4</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 314.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 314.

<sup>8</sup> Vincent L. Foulk, *The Battle for Fallujah: Occupation, Resistance and Stalemate in the War in Iraq* (Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2007), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 15, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Vincent L. Foulk, *The Battle for Fallujah: Occupation, Resistance and Stalemate in the War in Iraq* (Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2007), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 313.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 314.

<sup>14</sup> United States House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Majority Staff, *Private Military Contractors in Iraq: An Examination of Blackwater's Actions in Fallujah* (Washington, 2007), 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 8, 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 314-317, 319.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with General James N. Mattis, 17 March 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with General James N. Mattis, 17 March 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 317.

<sup>25</sup> Ricardo S. Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier's Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 331.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 332.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 332.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 332.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 333.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 333.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 314-317, 333.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with General James N. Mattis, 17 March 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with General James N. Mattis, 17 March 2009 and Brigadier General John Toolan, 16 February 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 60.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 60.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with BGen Toolan, 16 February 2009.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>42</sup> Vincent L. Foulk, *The Battle for Fallujah: Occupation, Resistance and Stalemate in the War in Iraq* (Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2007), 28.

<sup>43</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 68.

<sup>44</sup> Vincent L. Foulk, *The Battle for Fallujah: Occupation, Resistance and Stalemate in the War in Iraq* (Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2007), 28.

<sup>45</sup> Peter R. Mansoor, *Baghdad at Sunrise: A Brigade Commander's War in Iraq* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008), 285.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with General James N. Mattis, 17 March 2009.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 74-77, and Vincent L. Foulk, *The Battle for Fallujah: Occupation, Resistance and Stalemate in the War in Iraq* (Jefferson, McFarland & Company, 2007), 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>50</sup> Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 333.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 334

<sup>52</sup> Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 117.

<sup>53</sup> Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 335.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 335.

<sup>55</sup> Ricardo S. Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier's Story* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008), 355.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 356.

<sup>57</sup> Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 335.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 342.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with BGen John Toolan, 16 February 2009.



<sup>60</sup> United States House of Representatives, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Majority Staff, *Private Military Contractors in Iraq: An Examination of Blackwater's Actions in Fallujah* (Washington, 2007), 4.

<sup>61</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 399.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 345.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 400.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 401.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs: *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (January 2009), 12.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with General James N. Mattis, 17 March 2009.

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